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ABSTRACT

This document traces the history of Japanese education since World War II and explains how the Japanese educational system operates today. Included in the discussion is information about: (1) the 1947 Fundamental Law of Education (which called for equal educational opportunities and compulsory education for nine years); (2) the development of the courses of study at the national level; (3) the roles of curriculum councils and curriculum specialists; (4) the development of science teaching materials; (5) in-service teacher education; (6) budgets and subsidies of local schools; (7) the national evaluation of new curricula; (8) the broad objectives of the entire educational program; (9) the assessment of student needs; (10) the comparative achievement of Japanese students in contrast to other countries; and (11) some of the current concerns and issues facing education in Japan. (TW)

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THE ORIGINALITY AND PROBLEMS OF JAPANESE EDUCATION

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Most of our land is forest and grassland but the great mass of our people are engaged in manufacturing. You will note that the major imports are all raw materials such as crude petroleum, metallic materials, wood and coal. Our exports, as is only too clear from the daily news reports, are manufactured goods such as motor vehicles, iron and steel, telecommunication apparatus, optical equipment, VTR, and computers. As a nation we have moved rapidly since the mid-nineteenth century from an isolated agricultural economy with widely dispersed feudal authority to a highly centralized, industrialized economy with a strong commitment to education.

Many would argue that Japan is "western" in its economic and political relationships, its technological advancement, and its penchant for trying new things. This appears to be so, yet notice that these are all externally directed elements of a culture. The heart, the spirit, the ethos, and the fundamental groundings of Japanese life are still Confucian and traditional in orientation.

Time does not permit me to recap the history of educational development in Japan so I will pick up the story at the conclusion of World War II when the American occupation provided the impetus for a restructuring and redirection of our society so as to establish a democratic base of government.

The preamble of the 1947 Fundamental Law of Education sets forth the guiding spirit of our educational purposes. I quote in part:

"...We have shown our resolution to contribute to the peace of the world and welfare of humanity by building a democratic and cultural state. The realization of this ideal shall depend fundamentally on the power of education.

We shall esteem individual dignity and endeavor to bring up a people who love truth and peace, with education that aims at the creation of a general culture, rich in individuality, shall be spread far and wide."

In addition, the law provided for equal educational opportunity, compulsory education for nine years, and an education that was to be general, not tracked by ability or predetermined vocational expectations. Education was to be co-educational, provided by public institutions, controlled by the people with teachers as public servants.

Finally, the governance and administration of the schools was to be directly responsible to the citizenry. Subsequently, in the realization of these lofty purposes, a 6-3-3-4 system of public education was established.

At the national macro-level "the courses of study" are developed by members of the professional bureaucracy of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (Mombusho). For example, 15 years ago while at the Mombusho, I had responsibility for developing a course of study for science education and my charge came from the guidelines set forth by the National Curriculum Council.

The Curriculum Council meets, talks together, visits schools and educational agencies and follows various other steps to collect data to support its recommendations for revision of the curriculum. Drafts of their suggestions are shared with the Ministry and the public. Public discussion and debate are held in the national media, as public consensus is sought in resolution of the issues. Following revisions of the draft documents, the final report is accepted by the Mombusho and it is given to Curriculum Specialists in the Mombusho for implementation. As I previously mentioned, I was the Science Specialist in the Mombusho and had responsibility for the science portion of the curriculum. During a three year period I developed the course of study for the entire country and this was not done by simply sitting in an office in Tokyo. Objectives of science teaching, teaching contents of each grade and other science materials were written in an effort to interpret the general policies and goals of the National Curriculum Council report. The materials thus developed were tested in schools throughout Japan after holding in-service development and training workshops.

A transitional implementation period which lasts for about three years is allotted to all schools throughout the country. During this peiod, several workshops are held at the national level for the training of key teachers, school consultants, and school supervisors. The Mombusho and respective local boards of education sponsor these workshops in each prefecture and municipal district. During these workshops textbooks and

professional guides and magazines for teachers are circulated widely throughout the country for the purpose of familiarizing the teachers with the new aims, content and teaching methods and strategies which are to be used in the implementation of the new curriculum.

The trainees are invited to these workshops to familiarize them with the processes by which the materials were developed, and to acquaint them with the structure, use and evaluation of the materials. Teachers from pilot or experimental schools are sometimes invited to these workshops so that their rich experiences in dealing with learners can be tapped. They are particularly helpful in judging the utility of the new curriculum in terms of probable student reaction and its effectiveness in contributing toward cognitive, affective and social development.

Finaily, the national standards on the provisions of national teaching aids and equipment are revised by the national government and the new budget requirements are established. Appropriate subsidies are then provided to the schools. This is essential to the proper implementation of the new curriculum as the installation of new equipment and instructional aids in the local schools is an incentive to the acceptance and application of the new curriculum guidelines.

Some five years after the installation of a new curriculum a national evaluation is held to determine the effectiveness of the curriculum. Information from this formative evaluation is used as a basis for revision of the unsatisfactory parts. The

curriculum was revised in 1977 and the formative evaluation of each subject had been done in one percent of all schools by 1983.

The fundamental assumption of our entire educational program, both in the compulsory grades, one through nine, and at the kindergarten and upper secondary high school levels, is that all segments of our population should have equal access to a common core of educational experiences. To this end the national guidelines and courses of study are held in common for all. However, each school organizes its own curricula on the basis of the Course of Study, taking into consideration the actual conditions of its local community and school, and the development and characteristics of its pupils.

In terms of broad objectives, today's curricula could be summarized as follows:

1. To develop the pupil's ability to think for himself, and to cultivate creative intelligence and skills.
2. To develop strong will power, and to cultivate a self-reliant spirit.
3. To cultivate love and appreciation for Nature and Man.
4. To cultivate proper attitudes toward labor.
5. To cultivate practical sociability based on a consciousness of solidarity and a spirit of service to society.
6. To exert effort to train for a healthy and strong body.
7. To grow up as a Japanese citizen with love for people everywhere in the world in order to foster trust and respect of the international society.

It is not possible to provide a detailed breakdown of all the curricular goals and essential objectives for the entire education system in Japan. It must suffice to indicate that because of the organizational structure of our system, and its centralized control of the educational process from the Macro-level through the local meso-level into the micro-level of the individual classroom, the primary aim of the Japanese educational system is to keep the major national goals in clear focus. These goals are achieved through the various subject areas and each subject area and separate subject is approached in terms of the particular goals that arise from the interface of cultural, societal and individual needs.

One starting point for the revitalization of the curriculum is to reexamine our premises about the theme of general education, and its importance and place in Japanese society. This requires an assessment of the needs of students in a modern scientific society. Additionally, an examination of the nature of the subjects to be studied must be done to determine the most significant contributions that the various subjects can make toward the fulfillment of the developmental needs of the Japanese society and culture.

Furthermore, the development of a basic position on teaching the curriculum will require an analysis of the nature of the subjects to be studied. The changing needs of society and culture, especially the needs of learners based on knowledge of their developmental levels and behavior at various stages of development will give us valuable information toward this end.

In the sense that we are speaking of here, subject learning can provide systematic ways to answer questions. When students solve problems in their environment they may use any or all of the following processes: sense a problem, assemble data by careful observation and experimentation, organize and evaluate data, propose an explanation or hypothesis, test the hypothesis by further investigation, discover basic concepts and laws, and apply principles and generalizations to specific cases. Learning is a natural process, following a sequence of relationships, one after the other. Our minds connect one fact with another; we seek order and relationships between the known and the new, the unknown, or the not quite understood. In this way we arrange information so that it is linked by some inner law into a coherent network that we call knowing.

The procedures used to investigate subjects, the methodology of the disciplines, and the application of the knowledge generated by these procedures have become major forces in shaping the modern world. The development of the processes of scientific investigation, and the development of individual abilities with an attitude of acceptance of scientific inquiry, has helped cultivate the powers of critical observation, careful description and rational thinking. These factors are important for the appreciation and understanding of our civilization and its present and future society with its modern social, economic and cultural development.

Even in a highly centralized system of education such as we have in Japan, it remains for the teachers to assess the needs

of the particular community and individuals with whom they work. In turn, the students of today must adjust themselves to a much more complex and chaotic world than existed a generation or even one decade ago. The traditions and customs of our social order and the mechanisms of our contemporary society drive us first one way and then another, now in harmony with and then suddenly against the rapidly changing environment created by advances of science and technology. In these chaotic days the student is confronted with the urge to resolve these conflicts at the very time he faces strong internal developmental conflicts. He has an immediate need to adjust to ever changing patterns, while helping to create a new society. Therefore, we must prescribe how the integrated study of a curriculum and disciplines can meet the needs of a society and culture of the future.

The needs and the characteristics of the learner not only influence the choice of some content and learning experiences, but also the instructional conditions under which the learner attains the goals of learning. One purpose of a subject centered approach is to provide a design for relating teaching procedures to the intellectual growth of learners, including cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. The curriculum of a given theme within a subject needs to be organized and sequenced in terms of behaviors consistent with the growth and developmental characteristics of students. We must prescribe how the theme can meet the needs of the learner.

At all levels of curriculum planning and development we endeavor to relate our curriculum components vertically and

horizontally so as to provide maximum coherence and effectiveness. Thus the course of study provides a matrix of developmental learning experiences that comprise dimensions within and between levels of each subject. Within this matrix the series of problems, topics, processes, and courses to be presented are organized and sequenced in a way that facilitates learning and measurement of the extent to which teacher and learner objectives are attained. In large measure we follow the three major criteria identified by Ralph Tyler: Continuity, Sequence and Integration.

What remains to be noted is the relative strength and weaknesses of our efforts at curriculum development for all youth through grade nine (the third year of junior high school).

As most educators are aware, the Japanese system has been successful in terms of attracting and holding upper secondary youth without a compulsory system at that level. Roughly 95 percent of our youth continue past compulsory schooling into the upper secondary level and the number graduating is over 90 percent. Therefore, in terms of holding power, the system seems to function well. However, in recent years we have seen an increase in the number of dropouts or early school leavers. This is creating concern within our society in general, and for educators in particular.

When we look at the comparative achievement of Japanese youth internationally, we find they do very well, as the achievement among Japanese students is remarkably high. This suggests that the system does well at teaching for achievement

or those things measured by achievement tests. In this way we realize the goal better than most other countries. However, this does not mean that the Japanese are satsified with the results. On the contrary, criticism of the system is quite sharp.

In part, Japan is a nation hooked on education. Education is highly valued by nearly every segment of society. It is not a new fad, but rather a national passion that has roots extending beyond the beginning of the Meiji Period and the opening of Japan to Western ideas, culture, science, and technology. This being the case, the Japanese are very interested in a quality product. In addition, it is the national expectation that the quality product will be available for all and that it will be delivered equitably. But as any sociologists will tell you, social conditions are not equal. The rapid change of modernization and the urban migration of our population has increased the distance between rural, sparsely populated areas and the centers of mass culture. All of this exacerbated by the natural geography that tends to isolate some areas, even with a good public transportation system.

You may have noted in the financial support visual that there is a special budget for promotion of education in isolated areas. The common course of study is criticized because it does not address the real conditions of the environment of the communities which are different from the communities or large city areas for which national standards are set. For example, the weather conditions from one place to another differ considerably, if not extremely. In addition, natural materials,

cultural practices and environmental conditions differ across geographical areas. Historical traditions, while not as major a difference as in countries with many diverse ethnic and cultural groups, continue to cause ripples in the national educational fabric. Teachers and administrators involved in schools in farflung areas criticize the national standards as being inappropriate for their school children.

The Teachers' Unions and their members also criticize the curriculum which is made at the recommendation of the Curriculum Council and approved by the Minister of Education because in their view, it is a political document reflecting the views of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. Accordingly, they say that the teachers and learners whom the members of the Teachers' Unions are familiar with were not the bases of establishing the new curricular offerings. The members of the union also state that the government's curriculum for the schools is oriented towards a militaristic society when emplemented.

Japan is caught in a pattern of dependence upon education, and more particularly the examination system used to admit students to college, as the vehicle for ordering its whole social structure. The meritocratic system is built on the results of entrance examinations to universities. The universities are hierarchically ranked on the basis of public acceptance of the graduates of the university for specific employment which tends to be life-long. Thus, when a student succeeds in entering or fails to enter a particular university at age eighteen to twentyfive his (and it is predominantly males

who are in the competition for universities) future is set. All employment opportunities are tied to the university he attends or his failure to attend a university. In order to achieve enrollment in the highest level university possible, the educational system has become a vast sorting system for a meritocratic society with the examination results being the only criterion for decision making. An entrepreneurial system of "juku," specialized cram courses, and "yobiko," cram schools, hve arisen to tutor and prepare students specifically to pass the exams at various levels in the education system and to particular universities. Thus, even elementary students may be in "juku" in science, math, history or English to give them a head start on the process. This system, actually outside the existing system for public schools, puts much pressure on individual teachers and administrators and causes the national curriculum to be implemented in a manner that responds to the so called, "examination hell." A concommitant result is what Torsten Husen has called the development of a new "educational underclass," those students who find they can not possibly meet the test requirements and who find a school system directed primarily at passing college entrance exams irrelevant to their futures as well as to their present life. Thus we have seen a rise in the amount of student crime, violence, delinquency, vandalism, bullying, and the development or a general ennui among secondary students of lesser ability or lesser motivation. It seems especially severe in the junior high school.

In Japan the competition for a job and life career is basically over by age 18. For some students whose parents can afford it, it may continue for two or three more years of a "ronin" or masterless samurai type existence of attending cram schools and retaking exams until they are successful in getting into the university of their choice or until they give up. On the other hand, in many countries, life opportunities are just beginning at age 18 to 25. These are the big concerns of Japanese educators as we grapply with the problems of a rapidly changing society.